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VII.

SENSATIONALISM IN THE PULPIT.

WE do not believe that the American pulpit is fairly chargeable with sensationalism. If, indeed, we were content to take our impressions from the general character of most of the sermons which our daily papers think it worth their while to report, or from some of the *ad-captandum* advertisements which appear weekly under the heading of "Religious Notices," we might be led to an opposite conclusion. But it must not be forgotten that the daily papers are *newspapers*. When, therefore, they report sermons, it is not so much for their excellence as for that in them which brings them under the head of news. If the preacher be a distinguished stranger, they will faithfully reproduce his utterances, that all their readers may know what manner of man he is. But equally, if any stated pastor has done or said anything out of the common, they will be sure to chronicle his eccentricity. That which they are after is the unusual, and if a minister has said something daring in its defiance of all good taste, or something that smacks of heresy, or something that will be shocking to the feelings of the better portion of the community, then for that very reason his words will be faithfully recorded. There are, it may be, in these two cities, some six or seven hundred Protestant places of worship, in each of which weekly sermons are delivered, and it would be monstrously unjust to judge of the character of those which are unreported from that of those specimens which are given to the public just because of their deviating in some respect from the general standard. We do not wonder that readers at a distance should fall into the mistake of supposing that all our clergymen are of the same class as those whom the daily press has made notorious; but it is due to the Christian community to make it clear that in this case the unreported are overwhelmingly in the majority, and that they are unre-

ported not for lack of excellence so much as for lack of peculiarity in their ministrations. In our own immediate locality you may number all who by any correct use of the words can be called "sensational preachers" on the fingers of both hands ; while hundreds of others are seeking with quiet earnestness "to commend the truth to every man's conscience in the sight of God." And what is true here is, in the main, true also over the whole country. It is not to be supposed, therefore, that by writing on this subject we mean to insinuate that sensationalism is a common pulpit vice, or that American preachers are sinners above all others in regard to it.

In fact, much as we dislike sensationalism, and greatly as we deplore the evils to which it leads, we are far from believing that it is either the only or the chief danger of the pulpit in these days. We have more fear, on the one hand, of that heartless intellectualism which, by its uniform appeals to the head, develops a cold moderatism that leads at length to a positive unbelief ; and, on the other, of that tepid sentimentalism which, in its method of proclaiming that "God is love," wipes out all moral distinctions and drugs conscience into sleep. On each of the three sides of our nature, the intellectual, the moral, and the sensational, the preacher is in danger of yielding to that which it is his proper function to seek to correct and control ; and, in proportion as the moral and intellectual are superior to the sensational, the peril in regard to the former is more serious than it is in regard to the latter.

But, while not ignoring the others, our present business is with the sensational, and it will contribute to clearness if we here attempt a definition of that which we propose to treat. So soon, however, as we try to formulate that vague conception which we have of the thing, by putting it into words, we encounter difficulty. For it is immediately discovered that a certain kind and degree of the sensational enter into all eloquence. The orator, whether in the pulpit, or at the bar, or in the senate, seeks to persuade. But in pursuing that main design he uses certain tributaries, all of which are made by him to run into the swelling current of his speech. He employs ridicule to expose the absurdity of his antagonist's position ; he uses pathos to enforce the appeal which he makes for the consideration of the weak ; he turns imagination to account, by a harrowing description of the sufferings of those for whom he is pleading : and at length, by the united force of these influences, he carries his position and secures the consent of his audience to the course which he has been advocating. While he was dealing in

ridicule, his hearers laughed, and that was a sensation. When he was pathetic, the tears coursed down their cheeks, and that was a sensation. When he set the miseries of the suffering plainly before their eyes, they shuddered, and that was a sensation. Are we, then, to condemn all this? And, if we do, must not our censure lie against every triumph that the orator has won? Plainly, therefore, we must admit that the production of a sensation is not, in itself, an evil thing in eloquence, and can not be regarded as that which we designate sensationalism. The mischief lies in the prominence given to the sensation as an end in and of itself; and in the nature of the sensation as being out of harmony with the great purpose which every preacher of the gospel ought to have in view, and with the associations of the place in which his discourse is given. Much that would be proper enough on the platform, or at the bar, or in the senate, would be sensational in the pulpit, because there are certain restraints around the house of God, and the treatment of sacred subjects, the mere passing of which would be a shock to all reverent worshipers, and would tend to keep them from being suitably impressed by what is otherwise excellent. And, in every instance, the making of the production of an incidental and secondary effect a deliberate object must be pronounced objectionable. This, like the seeking of wealth, or the pursuit of pleasure, or the gratification of taste, for their own sakes, is more than an infelicity. It is the violation of an ethical principle. It is an immorality in rhetoric, and in the end it loses that which it desires, while the pursuit exposes him who enters on it to many perils. It might be too much perhaps to say that, like the determination to be rich at all hazards, it leads to evils "which drown men in destruction and perdition"; but it is undoubtedly true that they who *will* practice it do "fall into temptation and a snare."

These distinctions, as important as they are simple, will prepare us for defining sensationalism in the pulpit as the deliberate production by the preacher of an immediate effect which is not subordinated to the great purpose of his office, and is out of harmony with the sacred associations of the house of God. It is differentiated by the character of the effect, and the intention of the speaker to produce it. The sensationalist aims at an immediate result, and loses sight of the great permanent object which the minister of Christ should have in view. Instead of seeking to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus," he desires instant appreciation of his own performance. He sets a trap for the applause of his audience,

and when that comes he has his reward. He does not seek to persuade, but to please, or to exhilarate, or to startle, or to excite, and so descends from the lofty position of the sacred orator to the lower level of the actor. He is not forbidden to do any of these things, provided they be not in themselves irreverent or ridiculous, and provided also they be made by him conducive to the highest interests of his hearers. But he rests in the doing of them as itself his success. Every true minister feels, as Chalmers has so eloquently illustrated in his sermon on "The Slender Influence of Taste in Matters of Religion," that his hearers are in danger of mistaking their appreciation of "the loveliness of the song" for their submission to the truth which it expresses. But that which is an incidental peril even to the sincerest preacher is made by the sensationalist the deliberate object which he seeks to gain. It is to him, above all things, indispensable that his "effort" be enjoyed, and the ultimate issues are of small importance.

We have said all this is his deliberate purpose. There are men, who are unconsciously carried away by the vividness of their imaginations, or their natural dramatic power to say things which produce what might be described as sensational effects, and yet it would be unfair to call them sensationalists. Thus when Whitefield, in depicting the danger of the blind man, did it so graphically that even the cold and phlegmatic Chesterfield was compelled to relieve his feelings by crying out, "Good God! he is gone"—that was undoubtedly a sensational effect; but it does not follow that Whitefield was a sensationalist. The truth rather is that, in that case, he had a sensational hearer, who came not to be benefited by the discourse, but to enjoy the eloquence of the speaker. It is, of course, possible for one unconsciously to overdo that which is in itself perfectly legitimate, and every true preacher, who has any adequate conception of the sanctity of what Spencer used to call "that awful place the pulpit," will seek to curb everything that would savor of a mere performance. But, in fairness to every speaker, his motive must be allowed here, as in other cases, to give its character to his action. When the anniversary orator at Bunker Hill, seeing the last survivor of the Revolutionary fight rising in the midst of his address, thus apostrophized him, "Sit down, venerable man! it is for us, the descendants of that generation, to stand up before you!" he did a thing which, if it had been spontaneous, would have been truly as eloquent as it was appropriate; but, when the ancient warrior was

heard muttering to himself, "What does the man mean? Why, he told me to get up at that part of his speech," it was discovered that it was all a trick which he had devised for the production of a factitious effect, and that stamped it as sensational. So when subjects are announced beforehand of such a character as the following: "A Man getting out of a Ship"; "How Jonah lost his Umbrella"; "The Speckled Bird"; "A Little Man up a Tree"; "The Run-away Knock," we can not but recognize in such advertisements so many deliberate baits to catch a crowd, and it is impossible that the sermons should not be constructed with a view to pander to the multitudes when they came. All this is beginning at the wrong end, and is a mistaking of the expectation of curious hearers for that genuine acceptance which sooner or later always follows excellence. But it is worse—it is a deliberate letting down of the great aim of the Christian ministry, and makes the gathering of a large assemblage the primary object of the preacher; while the spiritual instruction of the people is treated as secondary and subordinate. We do not find fault with advertising the services. On the contrary, it might be very useful if the churches would combine to furnish every Saturday morning, in the columns of the daily papers, a complete directory of the places of worship in the city, with their locations distinctly defined, and the hours of service carefully noted. There would be no harm either in adding to each the pastor's name. But this hunting for taking sermonic titles, much as the author of a new romance cudgels his brain for a fancy name to it, is out of all taste; and we are glad to see that it is becoming less common among us than it was a year or two ago. It always seems to us to be a flag of distress, which indicates that it is with the utmost difficulty that things can be kept afloat; and those who indulge in it are apt to enter into a rivalry with each other as to which shall outdo his neighbor. Thus the subjects are chosen, not because the minister feels that there is something existing among his hearers that he can not keep silence about, or because there is something in his own heart which is as "a burning fire shut up in his bones" which he is weary with forbearing and he can not stay, but because he wishes to outrival others who have gone into the same line with himself. It is reported of Robert Hall that he declined attending what were called "association meetings," at which, in the course of the exercises, several ministers officiated before each other, saying, "What is it, sir, but preaching for a hat?" but sometimes, as we have glanced down the column of religious advertisements (so

called), we have thought that the brethren have been advertising for a hat ; and occasionally we have been reminded of the story Lockhart tells concerning the minister of Lilliesleaf, who, on being complimented by the father of Sir Walter Scott on having maintained his popularity as a preacher for two generations, made reply : " Indeed, I sometimes think it's vera surprising. There's aye a talk of this or that wonderfully gifted young man fresh frae the college ; but, when I'm to be at the same occasion with any o' them, I e'en mount the white horse o' the Revelation, and he dings them a' ! " Alas, there it is ! the object is not to save souls, but to distance all competitors in the race for popularity ; and notoriety is supposed to be the precursor of usefulness. It is a poor thing at the best, but even at its best it is an effect and not a cause. The gardener never concerns himself about the fragrance of his flower, but he seeks to make the flower itself the best of its kind, knowing that then the perfume will take care of itself. So let the minister strive to secure the great end of preaching in the salvation of men, and never trouble himself about the popular recognition of his work, for that will always come where it is deserved. The crowd that comes for an advertisement will go for a more attractive subject ; but they who are drawn to a ministry because they are spiritually fed by it will be seldom absent from their places, and will frequently bring others with them.

But sensationalism connects itself with the character of the effect produced as well as with the intention of the preacher to produce it. Everything shocking from its irreverence, or merely startling in its character, which is out of harmony with the great design of a discourse, and tends to detain attention upon itself to the exclusion of that which ought to have been, and which, perhaps, in other portions of his address really was the main purpose of the preacher, must be accounted blameworthy. Thus, to take an illustration from one of the grandest works of the great dramatist himself, it is impossible to acquit even Shakespeare from the charge of sensationalism for the introduction of the grave-digging scene into " Hamlet." It is out of harmony with the great purpose of the production, which is to show how

. . . . the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,

and brooding reflection lays an arrest on action. It is, besides, harrowing in its suggestions ; and the ill-timed mirth of the sexton is

not atoned for even by the moralizings of the hero ; while the presence of the ghastly skull produces a physical horror that does not help, but hinder, the spiritual effect of the whole. We can not read the tragedy without feeling that the teaching of the story is marred by the introduction of an entirely extraneous and repulsive thing ; and that, however true to nature the representation is, it is a dead fly in a very noble pot of ointment. In the estimation of many doubtless it will be the best-remembered part of the poem, and multitudes who have no glimmering of an idea of the lesson which the author meant to teach in it, or who have been unmoved by the noble passages in which it abounds, will greatly enjoy the witticisms of the men at their hardening work. Now, some sermons, otherwise excellent, are marred by similar incongruity. There is something in them which does not lie in the line of the design which they profess to have in view, but which has been brought in because of the shock which its presence there will give. Who does not know that the zest with which some preachers are listened to springs not so much from the things said by them as from the fact that such things are said in a church, in defiance of the sanctity of the associations with which such a place is connected ? The same expressions coming from men in other circumstances would provoke no remark, but in a church they show that the preacher has risen above conventionality, and so they commend him to a certain class of hearers. The joke which would be little accounted of elsewhere is greatly relished in the sanctuary, and the effect which it produces remains, while other portions of the sermon which were in every way unexceptionable are forgotten. The profanity of the oath which is common on the street has a peculiar piquancy when it is quoted, even if it be quoted only to be condemned, in the house of God, and the gusto with which it was given will be commented on when other things of great value are entirely lost sight of. We know, indeed, that conventionality may be so cared for that power will be destroyed, and we have heard fears expressed lest the pulpit should die of dignity ; but that is no reason why it should be murdered by irreverence. In order to escape the one extreme, it is not necessary to run into the other ; and, to prevent an audience from going to sleep, it is not absolutely essential to turn the sermon into a midnight directory. We would not reject an apt illustration which would clinch a lesson, even if it should bring a smile to the countenance ; but we demur to the deliberate introduction of low comedy into a discourse pronounced in a church. To our thinking, all that

comes under the category of "jesting which is not convenient"; and, if it be said that it is resorted to in order to bring an audience out, we can only reply that we are not of those who believe that the end sanctifies such means, and moreover that such means are not needed in order to gain the end. Everything low, vulgar, or in the least degree savoring of the profane, ought to be banished from the pulpit. For, though we draw a distinction between the service and the sermon, they are both alike a part of our homage to God. Why does the preacher care to preach if it be not because preaching is God's ordinance? Why does the hearer care to hear if it be not because of the reverence which he has for preaching as God's way of saving them that believe? The sermon is an offering to God on the part of the preacher equally with the praise and prayer; and the hearing is an offering to God on the part of the worshiper equally with the hymns and supplications; and, if that were remembered by all, there would be less disposition to say smart things, or to laugh at them when said. The associations of the place, too, should count for something. Even if we do not believe in what our Episcopal friends call consecration, "Nature herself" may teach us that a certain propriety should be observed by us when we are in a house of worship. Call it conventionality, if you please, still we are entitled to ask what greater harm there is in maintaining it there than there is in enforcing special rules at an evening party? And yet men who would be scrupulous to nicety in their regard to the etiquette of dress and address in the latter case will laugh to scorn all deference to recognized rules of decorum in the pulpit, and make a merit of their rudeness. But they can not do so without shocking the more refined of their hearers and inflicting an injury upon themselves. They destroy their usefulness with all who seek to be devout. But they blunt also their own finer instincts. It makes no great matter whether the conventionality be in every respect proper or not; the mere existence of it suffices, and it is one of the things in which a wise man, even if he differed from it, would seek to become as "a Jew to the Jews." Few uphold the justice of the game laws in the old country, yet the poacher commonly ends in becoming a good-for-nothing, for in breaking a bad law he has lost his sense of the sanctity of law as such, and so is ready for something worse. In the same way even if the conventionality that puts a restraint around the pulpit were not in every respect to be approved, the setting of it at defiance must break the enamel of the preacher's reverence, and may end in eating it away

altogether. How much more likely is that to be the case when the sentiment to which we refer is in the main a right one, sustained and approved by Christian people generally !

But this prepares us for looking a little at the evils to which sensationalism leads. One can see at a glance that it is hurtful to the hearers. It not only depraves their tastes, but it blunts their sensibilities. It has an effect upon them not unlike that produced by highly-seasoned novels of the "blood-and-thunder" order on their juvenile readers. It renders them largely impervious to the ordinary presentation of truth. The pampered appetite disdains everything that is not "gamey" ; and he

who peppers the highest is surest to please.

Besides, the exhilaration that is produced by the hearing of such exciting things is apt to be mistaken by those who experience it for real enjoyment of Christian ordinances ; and so under its influence they make professions which time only dishonors. They have confounded the intoxication created in them by the gratification of their perverted tastes with that totally different thing which the apostle describes when he says, "Be ye filled with the Spirit." It is nothing to the purpose here to reply that the same thing is done at the other end of the scale by those who are highly æsthetic in their likings ; for that is only another form of the evil, and not an extenuation of it. It makes little difference whether intoxication be produced by the vulgar absinthe or the aristocratic champagne ; the thing is always bad, and is not to be mistaken for the enthusiasm of a sober man. And the misfortune is that, in the case of those of whom we speak, a sensuous effect is regarded as a spiritual result to the detriment both of the self-deceiver and of the church at large.

But perhaps the most insidious danger is incurred by the preacher himself. He is apt to think more of saying a "smart," a "telling," or a "taking" thing than of communicating the truth. In this way he uses extravagant epithets, gives exaggerated descriptions, and magnifies or distorts features for the sake of effect. Even so noble a man as Thomas Guthrie once said, in regard to the preparation of a sermon, "It is like the drop-scene in a theatre, and you must lay on the color thick." But, with all deference to such an authority, that advice is exceedingly pernicious. For he who consciously exaggerates does at the same time blunt the edge of his conscience. Every time he deviates from or adds to the real state of the case he

makes himself a worse man. Truth is the girdle of character, and he who loosens that is on the way to looseness in other departments of morality. He is on an inclined plane, and may some day produce the biggest sensation of his life by a terrible *fiasco*. For the temptation is to go on. His hearers become accustomed to the dose, the appetite "grows by what it feeds on," and, in order to have the effects which were at first produced, they crave for something stronger. He seeks to meet that new demand just as he sought to meet the first, and so it increases until the flippant has become the irreverent, and the irreverent has become the profane, and the profane becomes the impure ; or until the odd has become the heretical, and the man who began with throwing aside conventionalities ends by parting with the central verities of the gospel. We do not affirm that all this has actually happened in any individual case, but the drift and tendency of sensationalism are in that direction ; and, in a day when some who are guilty of it are riding on the top of the wave, it is proper to warn young preachers of the peril that is incurred by entering on such a course.

It may seem, indeed, to offer a short and easy path to success ; for it can not be denied that we are living in an age which appears to crave for the sensational, but the yielding to it is always attended with danger, as may be seen by looking at what has actually occurred in other departments. There has been a call for it in worship, and the answer has been given in that ritualism which has honey-combed the Church of England ; but the peril has been revealed in the perversions to the Church of Rome which have thereby been caused. There has been a call for it in business, and the answer has been furnished in those feverish speculations which have maddened our Exchanges, while the danger has been made manifest in Black Fridays, Glasgow Bank failures, and that general depression from which we are only beginning to emerge. There has been a call for it in politics, and the response has been made by the appearance of a Beaconsfield conjurer on the one side of the Atlantic, while the peril has been exposed by cipher dispatches on the other. Now, when the same appeal is made to the pulpit, we may not flatter ourselves that we can respond to it without similar danger. That which in literature has made the difference between Walter Scott and Ouida will make as wide a chasm in the pulpit between the true minister of the word and the caterer to the cravings of the crowd. Trustees of embarrassed churches may so far catch the infection of our times as to look for a minister who will fill the pews by some

sudden rush, and bring up the revenue to a flowing surplus. But it will be "lightly come, lightly go," and pastors should steadily refuse to lead any such forlorn hope in that commercial spirit. There is but one attraction that it is safe for a minister to use, and that has not yet lost its power : "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." Let him adhere to that, for in the end it will prove sufficient. It may not bring the crowd so rapidly ; but it will transform them as they come, and they will come to stay. But, if they do not come, let him still keep to the lifting up of Him. Let him not forget that, when the sensation-loving multitude sought Him that they might see his miracles, he declined to gratify their curiosity, and gave them instead that deeply spiritual sermon which drove them largely away. But it was with the winnowed men that remained that he laid the foundations of his church. The call of the age for the exciting is a temptation to be resisted, rather than an influence to be yielded to, and if in resisting it the multitudes should be offended, then let them be offended, for in that case the discipline is only what they need. But they will not be offended, for, wherever the gospel is faithfully and earnestly proclaimed, "the common people hear it gladly." Let the ministers of Christ among us, therefore, remain true to the scriptural ideal of their office as designed not merely for the pleasing of men, but for their salvation "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" ; let them be loyal to the Master whose they are and whom they serve ; let them preserve that reverent spirit which a belief in the inspiration of the Book which they expound is fitted to produce within them ; above all, let them follow fully the example of Him of whom it was said, "He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street ; a bruised reed he shall not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench," and they will never be long without eager and numerous hearers ; nay, they may succeed, by the might of his gentleness and the power of his Spirit, in changing the character of the age from that of spasmodic and erratic excitement to that of steady, sure, and benevolent advancement.

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